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Research and Reflection

“You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him find it within himself” (Galileo Galilei).

Leaders do not learn how to be good leaders from a book but from their experiences and others who help them find these qualities from within. A Director of Special Education is one type of leader within a school district. This person leads a team of psychologists, counselors, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and special education teachers who all have a shared mission of meeting the diverse educational needs of special education students. This individual needs to be knowledgeable in school law and curriculum, prepare budgets, write grants, determine educational standards for special education programs, set policies, and also have a good understanding of technology and the role it plays in education.

Leaders need to look at the “big picture” when developing their vision for their department and determine what are the most important elements to focus on. Leaders create a clear vision and prioritize their goals and objectives to meet this vision in the most conducive way. This vision must be acted upon in order to gain any relevance or form (Hall). Their goals and expectations need to be clearly stated for everyone to know and understand so that the goals are met in the most efficient way. Continually evaluating and reflecting upon the program is essential in creating an environment where

goals are being met and each person is accountable for their role. This allows for the department to always improve and learn from mistakes and successes. A good leader is visible among her team, which allows for better communication a vital component in any organization (Hopkins).

An effective leader joins all teachers, students, administrators, school board members, and community members together and they share a common vision while working hand in hand. This leader provides adequate support and knowledge to her team as they model best practices in education. She models how to collaborate, listen, and engage all team members (Lambert). Good leaders are part of a team and not the sole person who solves all the problems or creates the goals and objectives to work towards. A leader builds a team of people who each bring different skills and abilities that help strengthen the team and in turn create solid outcomes. This leader instills in people a sense of shared responsibility where each person is invested in the vision and outcome (Hall). A strong team also communicates with all members and with others within a district on the progress of their goals. Members are always learning, giving, and sharing oneself with their team. When this happens good leaders are developing leadership skills in others, which is important for a successful team (Hopkins).

Technology is an integral part of the Special Education Department. It is used as an organizational tool among all team members. Assistive technology devices are also used by students. Special education teachers use technology as a platform for writing IEP's. Classroom teachers integrate technology into the curriculum on a daily basis and use it as a way to collect data. The Director of Special Education should have a solid background

in technology because they are the driving force of the department and the role model on implementing technology standards. They also need to work closely with the Technology Department so that both departments have the same vision in regards to technology and special education. Both departments need to understand each other's expectations and whether the infrastructure in the district can support the vision.

Technology needs to be integrated into the special education curriculum because it will help engage learners and is a way to help meet the different learning needs of each student. Approximately 2/3 of students want to use technology more in the classroom, which equates to more engaged learners (Lin). The technology standards need to be aligned with the special education standards. The Director needs to be aware of what technology is available and be able to assess and observe whether the technology is being integrated in an appropriate manner with special education students. Directors of Special Education need to make sure that special education students are engaged in active, constructive, authentic, and cooperative learning tasks (Bonk). They should guide teachers in helping them to regulate student learning and help them be problem solvers. Leaders help teachers use a variety of research-based instructional practices that meets the needs of all learners (Lambert). It was noted in a recent survey that 9 out of 10 teachers anticipate problems moving away from traditional lecture models and into one that is more technology based (Lin). This is where the support from the Director of Special Education is vital to the success of the program and to the integration of technology into the curriculum. A good leader supports their team by offering continuous professional developments and positive reinforcement. Leaders should inspire and offer

meaningful kindness to team members and this makes the journey and outcome successful (Hopkins).

The Director of Special Education needs to be knowledgeable in the web based Individualized Education Programs available to school districts for writing their IEPs and needs to work with the technology coordinator in choosing a program that would work in their district. Not only does the Director of Special Education need to determine an appropriate program but also needs to be a resource for teachers who use the program to answer any questions or problems that they may encounter. A program such as this helps streamline the paperwork and makes an IEP accessible from any computer.

Another technology tool that is helpful for a special education department is a program that can collect data on students to help show a student's academic growth or to measure the progress they are making towards their IEP goals. A program such as this needs to be researched by the Director of Special Education. The Director of Special Education would need to train her team on programs such as these.

Incorporating an online tool suite such as Google Docs would help keep the department organized, increase collaboration, and foster two-way communication. By using the calendar tool in Google Docs all team members would be aware of IEP meetings or any other relevant meetings within the department. Creating a special education webpage would help keep parents informed on any legislative updates, meetings, and contact information. The website could also be a way to show how the special education department utilizes technology not only in the classroom but also on a daily basis in the

department. This would help stakeholders and community members see the importance technology plays in the department.

A Director of Special Education would also be responsible for finding software or hardware that would assist students who have disabilities. Students with special needs may require assistive technology devices to help maintain or improve their functional capabilities. They would be choosing, purchasing, and assessing the device that would be used with a student. Such devices could include a computer to help students who have trouble writing or a communication board to assist students with communication needs. The Director would need to make sure that the device is being used appropriately and that all personnel are trained on the device.

A department that integrates technology and is continually assessing and reflecting on its effect on students and teachers is moving in the right direction. There are other factors that school leaders need to consider when implementing technology, namely the social and legal issues that inevitably arise. Prior to integrating technology, a team should develop policies and procedures that clearly define what would happen in cases of cyber bullying or copyright issues. Policies should be communicated and enforced to promote responsible use of technology.

It is the job of a leader to help everyone on their team to be successful and they should focus on the growth made and celebrate small victories (Hall). Technology integration is not an easy task for an education leader but with a clear vision, measurable goals, and teamwork it can be a successful. This success can have a positive impact on

students with special needs because technology can help to differentiate their learning needs.

This course has opened my eyes to new ideas and has made me personally reflect on my leadership qualities. This personal reflection has also made me realize what type of leadership role I would want to pursue one day. Two years ago when I began this program I had full intentions to become a technology coordinator. Through this course I have come to realize that the technology coordinator may not be the right fit for me.

Another factor that has contributed to this was being moved to a special education position this past year. Even though my job became more intense and the paperwork is crazy at times, my heart is in working with special education students. One day I would like to be a Director of Special Education and lead a special education department into the technology age. I believe that my technology background would be a great asset for a special education program in a district. This is why I chose this type of leadership position in a school district for this paper.

References

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